

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
WITH
SUE GENTRY

DECEMBER 9, 1985

INDEPENDENCE, MISSOURI

INTERVIEWED BY PAM SMOOT

ORAL HISTORY #1985-10

This transcript corresponds to audiotapes DAV-AR #3091-3092

HARRY S TRUMAN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



EDITORIAL NOTICE

This is a transcript of a tape-recorded interview conducted for Harry S Truman National Historic Site. After a draft of this transcript was made, the park provided a copy to the interviewee and requested that he or she return the transcript with any corrections or modifications that he or she wished to be included in the final transcript. The interviewer, or in some cases another qualified staff member, also reviewed the draft and compared it to the tape recordings. The corrections and other changes suggested by the interviewee and interviewer have been incorporated into this final transcript. The transcript follows as closely as possible the recorded interview, including the usual starts, stops, and other rough spots in typical conversation. The reader should remember that this is essentially a transcript of the spoken, rather than the written, word. Stylistic matters, such as punctuation and capitalization, follow the *Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th edition. The transcript includes bracketed notices at the end of one tape and the beginning of the next so that, if desired, the reader can find a section of tape more easily by using this transcript.

Sue Gentry and Jim Williams reviewed the draft of this transcript. Their corrections were incorporated into this final transcript by Perky Beisel in summer 2000. A grant from Eastern National Park and Monument Association funded the transcription and final editing of this interview.

RESTRICTION

Researchers may read, quote from, cite, and photocopy this transcript without permission for purposes of research only. Publication is prohibited, however, without permission from the Superintendent, Harry S Truman National Historical Site.

ABSTRACT

Sue Gentry, a newspaper reporter from Independence, Missouri, has written for the Independence *Examiner* since 1929. Miss Gentry served as a local liaison for national reporters during the Truman presidency, providing information while preserving the Truman family's privacy. Miss Gentry relates many stories of Mr. Truman providing her with "scoops." Of particular interest is Gentry's account of the VJ Day announcement in Washington for which she was present and allowed to use President Truman's secretary's typewriter for her story.

Persons mentioned: Dorsy Lou Warr, Margaret Truman Daniel, Floyd Warr, Harry S Truman, Bess W. Truman, William Southern, May Wallace, George Porterfield Wallace, Madge Gates Wallace, Blevins Davis, Rose Conway, Charles De Gaulle, Jim Therkells, E. Clifton Daniel, Jr., Perle Mesta, Paul Hume, Samuel Gallu, Herbert C. Hoover, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Cyrus Eaton, Steve Allen, Wallace H. Graham, Lady Bird Johnson, Dave Garroway, Bryant Gumbel, Randall Jessee, Richard M. Nixon, Lyndon B. Johnson, John F. Kennedy, Henry "Scoop" Jackson, Stuart Symington, Hubert H. Humphrey, Merle Miller, Philip C. Brooks, Carl Albert, Clifton Truman Daniel, Tom Fleming, Jack Benny, Bob Hope, Rufus Burrus, Elizabeth Gentry, and Elizabeth Gates.

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH
SUE GENTRY

HSTR INTERVIEW #1985-10

PAM SMOOT: So is it supposed to snow down here?

SUE GENTRY: Snow?

SMOOT: Yes.

GENTRY: Well, they didn't say that. The only thing I've heard . . . See, we've had this thunder this morning, and it rained, and now it's down past freezing. It's like 20-something, 29, or something like that, and that's freezing, and it said a 70 percent chance of a drizzle tonight. Well, it must be just going to keep on. So it's apparently going to be pretty awful. Well, you are right on the button.

SMOOT: Yes, we had another interview earlier, from 1:00 to 3:00, but it was over sooner.

STEVE HARRISON: Yes, I thought that one might go a little bit longer, so that's why I told you that we may be a little late.

GENTRY: Have you got a lot of interviews lined up?

SMOOT: For this week, we have about five more, and possibly six.

GENTRY: Now, did I tell you that my next-door neighbor here, Dorsy Lou Warr, she lived across the street from the Trumans, well, kind of this way, catty-cornered. She was Margaret Truman's age, and they went to school together, and she belonged to the gang and played at the house and the barn and everything. And you know, those children were in and out of the house,

and Mrs. Truman was nice to them, and so I thought she would be a good interview. Her father died, and the funeral was just held Saturday, but she's all right.

SMOOT: And what's her name?

GENTRY: Dorsy Lou Warr, W-A-R-R, and that's 720 West Waldo, and Floyd Warr is the husband. Her maiden name was Compton. The big stone house, you know, up high there right catty-corner from the Trumans', that was her home.

SMOOT: Mrs. Gentry, would you tell us your name, address, and your birth date, please?

GENTRY: Oh, dear, do I have to tell all of that? [laughter] My name is Susanna C. Gentry, although commonly known as Sue, and I live at 722 West Waldo, in Independence, Missouri, 64050. I've lived here since 1924, sixty-one years, and been a neighbor of the Trumans all these years, although it wasn't so important when you went by the house then.

SMOOT: Are you going to tell me your birth date?

GENTRY: Oh, my birth is 5/5/5.

SMOOT: Okay, when did you first meet the Trumans?

GENTRY: Well, I really don't know now. The first I remember about Mr. Truman was when he ran for eastern judge, and one of my neighbors said, "Tell your father to vote for Truman. He's a good man." He did. My dad did vote for

Mr. Truman, and he won, and he's been winning ever since.

SMOOT: How did you meet the Trumans?

GENTRY: Well, now, Mrs. Truman, I had not known her till I went to work for the Independence *Examiner* reporting. That was in 1929. Mrs. Truman was secretary of the needlework guild, and the needlework guild was a charitable organization. Each year they had what they called an in-gathering, and they collected warm clothing and bedding for needy people. Every year she would come in and tell me how many sheets they got and how many blankets and about the underwear for the children and those sorts of things, so that's how I got acquainted with her. Whenever she'd come in, why, if I were busy she would wait for me. So that's really how I got to know Mrs. Truman.

She was the wife of the county judge then. Then, of course, Mr. Truman, I really couldn't say that I knew him personally, just that he was the county judge. But when I went to work at the *Examiner*, why, he came in the office often because Colonel William Southern, who was the editor, was a friend of his and provided Mr. Truman with good press and counsel. Mr. Truman came in often to consult Colonel Southern. Colonel Southern was a country editor, and country editors prided themselves on knowing who everybody was and backing them if he felt they were worthwhile. Colonel Southern was a Democrat, and at the same time he had sort of a

connection with the Truman family because his daughter May Southern had married George Wallace, Mrs. Truman's brother.

Harry Truman always came in the office and always came walking real fast, and he was a gentleman, and he always tipped his hat and smiled. That's what I first remember about Mr. Truman.

SMOOT: Okay, so what was your association with her? What types of things did you do for Mrs. Truman?

GENTRY: Well, of course, they belonged to the social set in town. Colonel Southern would say to me, and Mrs. Wallace, of course, Mother Wallace, he would say . . . Mrs. Wallace's sisters and her nieces and nephews or somebody, if they came down to visit him, he'd say, "Call Mrs. Wallace and get a news item." And I would, and she was always very cordial and very nice. Then, when Mrs. Truman entertained her bridge club or some social event, why, I called and talked to her, and she was always very pleasant and very helpful to me.

SMOOT: Did you ever spend any time in the Truman home, for maybe tea or coffee?

GENTRY: No, you see, I didn't ever go to the Truman home until, oh, maybe sometime when maybe Mrs. Truman was a senator's wife. I would go down there maybe for a little interview or something, but I didn't, not socially. Then, when they went to Washington, as a senator's wife Mrs. Truman was very helpful to me because I was getting the woman's side of the story while the

rest of the boys, you know, were writing the politics. I remember when Margaret christened the U.S.S. *Missouri* that Mrs. Truman sent a letter and told me all about Margaret going to christen it, and we got a scoop on everybody. Of course, I knew the family better when they came home from Washington. They had more time to visit and pass the time of day, so I really knew them better then.

SMOOT: You said that Mrs. Truman had sent you a letter giving you the scoop on the christening of the U.S.S. *Missouri*. Do you still have that letter?

GENTRY: Yes.

SMOOT: Would you be willing to share that letter with the park service?

GENTRY: If I can find it. [laughter] I think I know where it is, but I don't know if I can go get it right now. I have an office upstairs, and last year when we did the Truman centennial edition I edited it, and I pulled things out of my file, and I never have gotten things back straightened out, but that's a New Year's resolution.

SMOOT: Okay, you said you had gotten to know the Trumans better after they came back from Washington, D.C.?

GENTRY: Yes. Yes, I did.

SMOOT: Could you elaborate on that a little bit for us?

GENTRY: Well, of course Mr. Truman then had his first office up in the Federal Reserve Bank Building in Kansas City, and I'd been up there a time or two.

Well, what I was going to say is after Mr. Truman became President . . . See, I was a reporter when I started at the *Examiner*, and then during the war the fellows all went to war, so they made me city editor. Mrs. Truman, when she was home one time after . . . oh, in June. He was made president in April, and his first visit home was in June, and I saw Mrs. Truman then. I said, "I might come to Washington, I'm not sure. I have a cousin there, and I may come." She said, "Well, if you do, call me." I said, "How does one call the White House?" Well, she gave me a number.

So I did go to Washington. It was in August, and things were getting sort of . . . Well, the war in Europe was already over, and it sounded like the war in the Pacific might be over pretty soon, so I thought, "Well, I'll call Mrs. Truman." I got a hold of her, and she said, "You'd better get down here this afternoon." So I got a cab and went down, and that's when Mr. Truman announced the surrender of Japan. But Mrs. Truman had me come over to the White House, and I had tea with her on the portico and that sort of thing.

So I had seen her several times, you know, when she was Mrs. President, first lady. But of course their trips home were always hurried. Then several times Blevins Davis used to have parties out here, and I had seen them several times. At Christmas time he would have a party, and he always asked me, and I would see them.

SMOOT: Who was Blevins Davis?

GENTRY: He was a hometown boy who went to New York. He was always interested in . . . This was the early days of broadcasting. He went to London and broadcast the coronation, and in New York he worked some in the theater, and he became a producer. He married a rich woman and he inherited \$8 million and bought a big mansion out here and really had a good time. I think he and his wife were entertained in the White House when they were married. I know that, but anyway they used to have these nice, fabulous Christmas parties out here on Glendale out on Lee's Summit Road.

SMOOT: When you had tea with Mrs. Truman on the portico, what sort of things did you talk about?

GENTRY: Well, she had some guests from Missouri, and she said, "Come out and meet these guests from Missouri." Well, who they were now, I don't know, because I was pretty excited. [chuckling] First visit to the White House. She had a secretary . . . She had tea and cake. She said, "You'd better have another piece of cake, Sue, because no telling when you'll get to eat tonight." And she was right, because, see, that's when the president announced the surrender of Japan.

And then I stayed . . . Miss Rose Conway, who was Mr. Truman's secretary, I said, "I don't see anyplace for me in the press room." You know, the fellows were all over that, and everybody was crazy. I said, "I don't see

anyplace for me to write my story for the *Examiner*,” and she said, “Well, use my typewriter.” So I wrote my story on the president’s typewriter. Then, after it was over, I had to get to the Western Union office to file my story, and that was quite a chore. [chuckling]

But then two or three days later, she invited me to come back. She showed me all through the White House then and was very gracious and took me to all the different rooms, the State Dining Room, and the Rose Room. General [Charles] De Gaulle had been there the night before, and she said to the maid, “Has the general gone? I want Miss Gentry to see this room.” And she said, “Well, I haven’t made it up yet.” Mrs. Truman said, “Oh, we don’t care about that.” So we went in, and there were the general’s pajamas. So, anyway, she was real nice. And then she invited me back again, and I went to the Congressional Medal [of Honor] awards ceremony. So I was there two or three times and got that little special treatment. I thought, well, now, here I was a reporter, and Mrs. Truman came in to report something, and I just tried so hard to please her, and apparently I did, and then when her husband became president, she invited me to the White House.

SMOOT: Did you ever meet her mother? Did you ever meet Mrs. Truman’s mother, Madge Wallace?

GENTRY: Mrs. Truman’s mother? Just once. She was a very nice lady, but I talked to

her on the phone a number of times.

SMOOT: Did Mrs. Truman ever talk to you or give you the scoop on any special gifts that she had gotten?

GENTRY: Well, no, I don't believe so. I don't think of anything. I remember one time I was down there visiting with her, after Mr. Truman, after they came home from Washington, and the library was being built. She said, "You know, Mr. Truman tells me he's coming home for lunch every day now." She said, "Murder!" She said, "I don't even know what to serve for lunch. I don't eat any myself." She said, "He said, 'Just give me a roast beef sandwich and a glass of milk.'" She said, "He talks like we have roast beef in the refrigerator all the time!" [chuckling] So, you know, just little things like that.

I was thinking about the house. Of course, as I said, I worked and went by the house every day, you know, going and coming, and I don't remember paying any particular attention to it. You know, it was just a nice big house, and I knew who lived there. Then, of course, when he became president they painted the outside and did an awful lot on it. Because I remember we were taking pictures of the scaffolding there and writing little stories.

Of course Mrs. Wallace was the mistress of the house, and Mrs. Truman didn't presume to do too much to her mother's house. It wasn't

until after her mother was gone that she really did a lot of renovating and got new carpeting and new drapes. I remember one time I got some new drapes, and the girl who did her drapes was doing mine. The Truman house, see how that goes up there in the little circle?

SMOOT: Yes.

GENTRY: The Truman house has that. Apparently houses . . . that was a common architectural theme at that time. She said, “Mrs. Truman just hated those things that came up above the sill there. She wanted to know, ‘Could you cut those off?’” [laughter] So I thought, well . . . And I was like Mrs. Truman. I thought, I don’t like those, but every old house I have been in . . . I mean, I never thought about them before, but ever since then, every time I go in an old house . . . they all have them. They’re in the front room in all of them. The time that, of course, the house looked the best I guess it ever did look was when Margaret Truman got married. And I went to the . . .

You see, all the time Mrs. Truman . . . they were president, she couldn’t just invite me to the house because I was a reporter, you see. Because she didn’t see any of the press, but I could talk to her on the phone, and she would tell me anything I needed to know. When these other people came here, and they’d come to the *Examiner* office because they couldn’t see her, and so I would try to help them. Colonel Southern always told me to help them. He said, though, don’t invade their privacy ever. He said,

“We don’t ever want to invade their privacy. But,” he said, “these reporters are going to ask all kinds of questions, and you help them all you can.” So I would always tell Mrs. Truman, “Now, I’m helping them, because if I don’t help them they’ll speculate and write something that isn’t so. So I want to be able to tell them what’s so.” So she was always understanding and always did that. So I helped a number of people who came here to do stories for *Collier’s*, the old *Collier’s* magazine, and *Life*, and all of them.

But Margaret Truman’s wedding, as I said, the house was very beautiful. Jim Therkells, who was a black man, and you didn’t have anything in town that you didn’t have Jim Therkells in his white coat at the door opening the door, you know, and inviting you in. So he was at the door and invited people into the vestibule.

Then Mr. and Mrs. Truman and Mr. and Mrs. Daniel and Margaret and Clifton were standing there to greet the guests. Then it wasn’t long until the formal receiving line sort of broke, and pretty soon Mr. and Mrs. Truman were standing under Margaret’s picture there, and Margaret and Clifton were standing under Mrs. Truman’s pretty picture there in kind of the music room. Then Margaret and Clifton went to the dining room, and that table was so beautiful. The cake was a three-tiered . . . Let’s see, I don’t know if it was three or . . . It was maybe a five- or six-tiered cake, and it was trimmed in pink, and it had a rose wreath around it. Oh, it was

beautiful! They cut the cake there. And the weather, it was the twenty-first of April, 1956, and the weather was so good, so pleasant, that people sprawled out onto that screened-in porch and went out in the yard. And they had turkey and Boone County ham and little rainbow sandwiches and all those sort of things, and champagne, of course.

SMOOT: Okay, so you have been in the Truman home?

GENTRY: Yes.

SMOOT: Was there anything in there that struck you a certain way?

GENTRY: You know, the thing that amuses me, the times I've been there, like with Margaret's wedding, times when I have gone to interview Mrs. Truman or something . . . well, you know, you didn't look around. [chuckling] You didn't gawk around. I mean, I was a guest in her home and I was talking to her, and I couldn't look around and observe everything, so that's what I always think when somebody says something to me, "Well, how did the home look?" Of course, it was an old home, and there were so many beautiful things, and the fireplaces I always thought were pretty, and the pictures were pretty, and, you know, like the old furniture. But, really, as far as looking around, I didn't.

SMOOT: On the occasions when you were there to interview Mrs. Truman, what room did the interview take place in?

GENTRY: Well, usually we'd sit there in the parlor.

SMOOT: And how long did they usually last? Or did it basically depend on what it was that you were talking about?

GENTRY: Well, usually if I was working I'd get what I went after and leave.
[chuckling]

SMOOT: Did you ever have tea afterwards?

GENTRY: No, I always hurried off.

SMOOT: So what do you think was extra special about Mrs. Truman, if anything? Do you think there was something special about her?

GENTRY: Well, her friendliness. She was always so friendly. One time—this was after they had come home—she and I were invited to the same party over at the Carriage Club, a luncheon, I believe, in Kansas City. And she said, "I'll drive." So she picked me up, and I was working, and we drove over to Kansas City. When we got about . . . well, we were pretty close to the club, she looked at her watch, and she said, "We're almost ten minutes too early." She said, "We'll park a minute." So we parked, and then she watched her watch, and then we drove up and went out, and when we went in we were exactly on time. But they had a certain code of ethics, I guess you'd say. You could be two minutes early, but you mustn't be more than two minutes late, you know, so we arrived right on time. But I was really impressed then to think of her discipline, how she went by the social rules.

SMOOT: When she picked you up, what kind of car was she in? Do you remember

what color it was?

GENTRY: Yes, I think it was that Chrysler that they have. I'm pretty sure it's that same one. Because, see, I think they got that . . . Well, I can't think. Yes, they got it after they came home, I believe, because he had never driven a car all the time he was president—I mean, he didn't have to—and he'd given this little coupe he had to his sister.

SMOOT: So, after you came from Kansas City, did Mrs. Truman bring you back home?

GENTRY: Well, I was at the office. She took me back to the office because I was working. I just asked for a long lunch hour so I could go, and they thought since it was the former first lady it would be all right. [chuckling] But she was a very nice lady.

Then, let's see, another time . . . I belong to Theta Sigma Phi, now Women in Communications. Do you belong to that?

SMOOT: No, I'm a historian. We have Phi Alpha Theta.

GENTRY: You're a historian, that's right. That's right. Well, I belonged to that, and I was president. When Margaret got married, why, we were having our matrix table banquet that night, and Mr. and Mrs. Truman, after they came home, I had invited them and they always came, and it was at the Muehlebach [Hotel] downtown. And you know, it was a big deal to have Mr. and Mrs. Truman. We put them at the head table and . . . So here I was

president and we had announced the matrix table for April 21, and lo and behold, that's the day Margaret got married. So we thought, oh, we won't have a nice banquet this time at all. But I went to the wedding. This was Saturday. We used to work till noon on Saturday. I worked till noon, came home, changed my clothes, went to the wedding, went to the reception, changed my clothes, went to the Muehlebach, and Blevins Davis took me to the Muehlebach. And you know that I got the minister who had performed Margaret's wedding to give the invocation at the matrix table, and Blevins Davis took a table and he had all these guests like . . . all these guests, some of these writers like . . . oh, well, Perle Mesta for one thing came. And he had just a whole lot of these people who had come from Washington and New York to the wedding to our banquet. He gave a talk, and it was the nicest one we'd ever had. [chuckling] And then, after the banquet was over, why, I wrote a story for *Life* magazine about the wedding. So I had a full day.

SMOOT: I'm sure you did.

GENTRY: The reporter and photographer were there, and they had a room and I went up there, and they had a typewriter, and I wrote my story, and I think I was until after midnight getting home.

SMOOT: So I trust that you enjoyed writing stories or writing reports given to you by Mrs. Truman?

GENTRY: Yes, I did very much, and she was always so gracious. I remember I would say, "Thank you, Mrs. Truman!" and she'd say, "Not at all." [chuckling] I always remember her saying, "Not at all." I don't remember anyone else saying that.

SMOOT: So, in most cases when she called you to write a story, did she just call you any time of the day or any time of the night? Or did she call you during working hours?

SMOOT: Mostly during working hours. I think what made my job so easy was Colonel Southern, because they trusted Colonel Southern and in turn they learned to trust me. All during the time the Trumans were in the White House, we could find out most anything because May Wallace would . . . I could always call May Wallace and find out something, and we could get things nobody else could get.

SMOOT: So is there only one newspaper in Independence? I know this is a small place, but I've been to another place probably about this size, in Menden, Nebraska, and at one time they had two newspapers. I was just wondering . . .

GENTRY: Well, we've had a lot of fly-by-night newspapers, and right now there is something they call the *Express*; and it's a free thing, I believe they mail it out to people, and it's a weekly.

SMOOT: Okay, would you say that the information that you got, you got the

information or the Independence *Examiner* got the information before the *Kansas City Star*?

GENTRY: Yes. Now, of course, the *Kansas City Star* has always had a news bureau here, you see, and they were good competition, you know. They'd always had fellows, you see. Of course, you know, I had a little advantage on the fellows because I could get that kind of chitchat, but then they had a girl come. We were good friends, but the first time she came was to Margaret Truman's wedding. She came in and introduced herself, and everyplace I went she was following me, [chuckling] because she didn't know anybody in Independence. And I helped her, you know. We became good friends, and we're still good friends, although we're both retired.

SMOOT: So you said there was a lot of competition. But how did that make you feel? Did you feel good about . . . Well, really, you were getting the inside scoop, right?

GENTRY: Yes, I felt good, and I was young and serious and tried so hard, you know. And I really didn't think I was doing anything real great. And now I stop and think about it, and I thought, "Well, golly, that was really something!" [chuckling]

SMOOT: Did you ever take any pictures of Mrs. Truman, or do you have any pictures of maybe she and you together, or anything of that nature?

GENTRY: Well, I didn't ever take any. I think there are several . . . I have some like it

someplace, I don't know, like at the matrix table and something like that.

SMOOT: Would you be willing to share those with the park service?

GENTRY: Well, if I can find them. I have a picture there with Margaret when she started her singing career. She called me, and she was over at the Muehlebach, you know, having a press conference. I went over and got that story and went to the concert. Of course, I'm no music critic, but I was writing the local color, you know. All of Independence was there, and it sounded good to us. [laughter] Even if it didn't to what's his name, Mr. [Paul] Hume?

SMOOT: I don't know. Who's Mr. Hume?

GENTRY: Well, he was the critic, you know, who wrote such a bad review of Margaret, and Mr. Truman wrote him a letter. [chuckling]

SMOOT: No, why don't you tell me about it?

GENTRY: Well, that's a well-known story. It was in Washington. She had given a concert and a critic for one of the New York or Washington papers gave her a bad review. So Mr. Truman was so mad he sat down and wrote him a letter, you know, and told him that he didn't know what he was talking about. [chuckling] Anyway, it's in that play, *Give 'Em Hell, Harry*. Have you ever seen that?

SMOOT: I've seen it, but I haven't had the opportunity to read it.

GENTRY: I'm one of the characters in the play.

SMOOT: Is that right?

GENTRY: In the play Mr. Truman is shown writing this letter to this music critic and taking a stamp out of his pocket and licking it and putting it on there. You know, he used his own stamps in the play. This Sam Gallu who wrote this *Give 'Em Hell, Harry* came to see me, and we sat around this table and talked, and he told me he was writing this play. We had quite a conversation, and after he went back to wherever he lived in the East, he wrote me a letter and thanked me and he said, "I put you in the play." And so I wrote back and I said . . .

[End #3091; Begin #3092]

GENTRY: What was I telling? Oh, I said Mr. Sam Gallu came and did this play, and he wrote back and said he'd put me in the play. So I thought, well, what in the world did I say? And I got kind of afraid, well, maybe I've said something I shouldn't have. He said, well, he'd let me read it, and he sent it to me, and he had quite a bit about me reporting on Mr. Truman and this and that and something else. Oh, he said, "Miss Sue Gentry, one of the best-known newspaperwomen in Missouri." So I was reading that to my brother, and he said, "He's covering too much territory." [chuckling] Anyway, I cut it down, and so then he wrote back and said that his play had run four hours long, and he had to cut it to two hours. So I thought, well, here's where I go on the cutting room floor, but they did leave me in. I went to see it, and I

wasn't embarrassed. Mr. Gallu had me walking up the street and . . . that famous story about Mr. Truman cutting the grass on Sunday morning?

SMOOT: Yes?

GENTRY: Well, I'm walking up the street, and Mr. Truman is cutting the grass on Sunday morning, and he said, "Good morning, Miss Sue. On your way to church?" And he said . . . I've forgotten what else. But anyway, he said, "Have a good pray, Sue," and then I go on. I said to Mr. Gallu, "Well, Mr. Gallu, that didn't happen." "Well," he said, "Mr. Truman cut the grass on Sunday, didn't he?" I said, "Well, yes." He said, "Well, you do live down that way, don't you? You do walk by there sometimes, don't you?" And I said, "Well, not in recent years I haven't. I've been riding." [chuckling] "Well," he said, "you'll go along with a good story, won't you?" [chuckling] So that told me a lot about the way things were done.

SMOOT: So did you ever have an opportunity to interview Mr. Truman for any reason?

GENTRY: Mr. Truman?

SMOOT: Yes.

GENTRY: Oh, yes, numerous times. After he got his office out at the library, why, I was out there about every other day or so. One day I went out and he was reading a letter. I said, "Any news this morning, Mr. Truman—Mr. President, I always said?" He handed me this letter, and it was from Herbert

Hoover, and Herbert Hoover was thanking him for inviting him to the White House. He said, “You undid some serious wrongs.” Apparently, President Roosevelt had never invited him to the White House, and he had offered to help him on some things. You remember he had taken care of that food program to help feed the hungry. He had overseen that, and he had done a lot of engineering work, and Mr. Roosevelt never invited him to the White House, never recognized him in any way as a former president. And Mr. Truman invited him to the White House, gave him a job, you know, and so he was thanking him for that. So he handed me this letter, and I read it, and I said, “Mr. President, do you care if I make a story out of this?” He said, “Sue, I’m giving you a scoop and you don’t even know it!” [chuckling] I was out there a lot.

SMOOT: So were there any more occasions like that? I mean, are there any more specific stories that you might remember?

GENTRY: Well, one time a group of Russian newspapermen came—I think they were newspapermen. Anyway, it was a group of Russians and they were out at his office, and I was there and his secretary was gone. So he was talking to the Russians, and he said to the Russians, “You Russians don’t keep your word.” He said, “We can’t do business with you because you never keep your word.” And about that time he walked off. Well, they thought he had dismissed them abruptly. I realized later he had gone to answer the phone

because his secretary wasn't there. [chuckling] He heard the phone ring, and so he went to answer the phone. But, anyway, I always remember that.

Then another time Cyrus Eaton and his wife came, and I went in and sat down and listened to the interview when he did it. And Steve Allen, you know. I know now I had a lot of nerve. And I don't know, I thought it's a wonder Mr. Truman didn't tell me to go on and mind my own business, because, see, I'd be the only reporter around, and I'd just . . . When he had this interview with Mr. and Mrs. Cyrus Eaton—he was the steel tycoon from Ohio and his wife was the . . . I think she was his second wife. She was a pretty blonde woman, and she was in a wheelchair, and she said, "I've come to ask you . . . you know, I'd like to run for senator in Ohio." Some senator who had had the job for a long time was retiring. She said, "What would you think?" He said, "I think you ought to throw your hat in the ring." And so it made me a cute story because she had on a long, fur coat, but she had a little whimsy on, you know, just one of those . . . and I thought she tossed her whimsy. [chuckling] Anyway, it made a cute story.

Then another time when I was president of the Missouri Women's Press Club and they came to Independence for a meeting, I made arrangements for them to go to the Truman Library. That was in the days when Mr. Truman was there, and so I asked him could he be there to welcome the girls, they were coming on a Saturday afternoon. And I wasn't

sure whether he'd do it because he didn't usually come on Saturday. But anyway, we went out there on Saturday afternoon, and the guard at the door said, "Miss Gentry, the president is waiting for you in his office." So I took the girls in, and he was so nice and welcomed them and everything, and then he said, "Now I'll take them on a tour of the library." And he said to me, "Sue, you watch my desk and make sure that somebody doesn't take a souvenir off of it." [chuckling] So I stayed and watched his desk. But anyway, I mean, I knew him that well. Oh, I'll have to show you something else.

SMOOT: Okay, just a minute. Steve, do you want to unhook her?

GENTRY: Oh, I was just going to get up and run off.

SMOOT: So was Dr. Graham. [chuckling]

GENTRY: He's a card, isn't he? I tell you!

SMOOT: You look really pretty in your red and white.

GENTRY: Oh, thank you.

SMOOT: I'm trying not to look around your house.

GENTRY: Oh, well, you look around. You look, because it's all right.

SMOOT: Well, you have a personalized picture here from Mr. Truman. [reading]

"To Sue Gentry, Kindest regards to a great newspaperwoman from a . . ."

What does that say?

HARRISON: Oh, "from an admirer . . ."

GENTRY: "For her accurate reporting."

SMOOT: March 6, 1968.

GENTRY: No, it's '63. It looks like an 8 but it's a 3. Because, see, he wasn't out there after '66 or '67.

SMOOT: Yes, he sort of has a doctor's handwriting. [chuckling]

HARRISON: That's nice.

GENTRY: Isn't that something?

SMOOT: You said you had a picture of Margaret?

GENTRY: I have a picture here . . . I have this one. Do you want to come here?

SMOOT: Sure.

GENTRY: That's Margaret there. Let me see if I can get a better light.

SMOOT: Have you ever seen any of these pictures before, Steve?

HARRISON: No.

GENTRY: I'm interviewing her. I think that was 1947. Here, 1947, and I was a . . .

HARRISON: Hang on just a second, because I think this might reach in there.

Let's see, it gets pretty close. Okay, go ahead. This is fine. This bottom right one there?

GENTRY: Yes, this is Margaret Truman. That was in 1947, and she came to Kansas City to do a concert. She was up at the Muehlebach, and she called me and said she was going to have a press conference, so I went up to interview her. That was in a magazine, *The Independent*. That's the Kansas City society

magazine. This is when I went to the concert. But she was just starting out. Then this is Lady Bird down at the LBJ ranch. When Margaret Truman got married, I was on the old Dave Garroway "Today" show. That was before . . . let's see, who . . . ? Well, now it's Bryant Gumbel and . . . it's that show. But this is Randall Jessee who was a Kansas City radio station [announcer], and these are the NBC people taking the picture. There's a picture of Mr. Truman in his old bubble car. They brought it out there, and I was out there getting a story. There I am with Mr. Nixon up at the White House. I was out there one time and got a story, and when we were through with our little story Mr. Truman said, "Come here, Sue, I want to show you something." And I leaned down like that and our photographer took the picture. They sent it to me at the office, and they kidded me up there and said I was hugging the president. [chuckling] Here's LBJ. It looks like I'm mugging the camera there. [chuckling]

SMOOT: These are really neat pictures. These are some I haven't seen before.

HARRISON: Did you cover most of the VIP visitors, I guess, to the Truman home?

GENTRY: Yes. Well, they mostly came to the library, you see. Like Jack Kennedy came, you know, when he was trying to get the nomination, and Mr. Truman thought he was too young. Do you remember? [chuckling] So then he went to the convention and came back with the nomination, and he had

“Scoop” Jackson and Stuart Symington and Hubert Humphrey. I don’t know who all were with him. Mr. Truman decided then maybe after all he was old enough, and, of course, endorsed him because he was a party man. Then, of course, Hubert Humphrey had been there a number of times. Well, everybody came and went, you know, and I was usually out there when they came.

HARRISON: Now, like that picture with Nixon, is that at the Truman home?

GENTRY: Yes, that’s at the gate there at the Truman home. That’s when he came and brought the piano. I was up here, and one of the fellows was out at the library. And you know, now I wasn’t even out at the library, but Merle Miller, that . . . What was his book? *Give ’Em Hell, Harry?*

HARRISON: Oh, gosh, *Plain Speaking* or something?

GENTRY: *Plain Speaking*, and he said that . . . Well, he came and I went to lunch with him. But anyway, he put me in his book, and he said in there, talking about Nixon playing the “Missouri Waltz.” He had worked real hard to learn this, and Mr. Truman and Mrs. Truman were standing there, and Mr. Truman was getting a little bit old then. So Mr. Miller quoted me as saying, “Mr. Truman turned to Mrs. Truman and said, ‘What’s he playing?’” And I thought, “Oh, dear, that sounds like I thought Mr. Truman was senile.” I told Merle Miller, I said, “I’m embarrassed at that.” He said, “Oh, no, Nixon was just doing such a poor job, Mr. Truman didn’t recognize it.”

[laughter]

HARRISON: Did you ever get any indication from them how they felt . . .
Because Nixon, it's my understanding, visited them in the home though,
too, at their home.

GENTRY: Yes, they came, and Mrs. Nixon . . . I remember, when I came out of the
home Mrs. Nixon was sitting in the car with Mrs. Truman. Mrs. Truman
said something and pointed to me, and I didn't go up to the car or anything,
but I could just see Mrs. Truman saying, "Well, now, that girl is a reporter,
you know." And Mrs. Nixon smiled at me real nice, but I didn't meet her.

HARRISON: But they were visiting out in the car?

GENTRY: Yes. Well, they had been in the house. Then, of course, the Nixons came
when Mr. Truman died, and went to the house, and then the Johnsons also
came. I went to Mr. Truman's funeral and reported that. Well, you know
they had to be invitational affairs. Like Margaret's wedding, I was the . . .
Oh, what do you call them, when one person serves for all the rest of them?
Well, all right . . . [chuckling]

HARRISON: They didn't want a whole bunch of reporters there, so they just
invited you, and then you kind of shared the story with others.

GENTRY: Yes. This was before television, Margaret's wedding. When I came out,
there were a whole bunch of radio people waiting for me. A friend of mine
told me, who lives in California, she said, "I was riding along in my car, and

I heard you talking.” [chuckling] And I thought, “That’s just wonderful.”

But now, you know, things are not so world-shaking.

SMOOT: So was this picture here with you and Mr. Truman in the *Independence Examiner*?

GENTRY: No, that just was given to me. I wouldn’t let them . . . Well, I don’t know, maybe they didn’t even ask to, but anyway I didn’t want to put myself in the paper with him.

HARRISON: Especially not hugging him, huh? [chuckling]

GENTRY: Yes, that’s what they said, it looked liked I was hugging him.

SMOOT: It looks like you’re just looking over his shoulder.

GENTRY: Here’s another picture here when Mr. Truman was . . . after he came home. Every year on his birthday, the press always had a little party for him, had cake and ice cream or coffee or something—anyway, cake. This was down at the Missouri Pacific Depot, and he and Mrs. Truman were leaving to go to Washington, or New York to visit Margaret, I believe. So here we are down here, and I used to be the only woman reporter running around. Now there’s a little girl with a microphone every time you turn around. [chuckling] But anyway, this is Randall Jessee, and there’s an AP [Associated Press] man and a UP [United Press] man, and there was a *Kansas City Star* and *Examiner* photographer. And in the back there is the Railway Express man that always handled his trunks and his baggage, you

know, when they went and came.

That's out at the Truman Library. That's Dr. Brooks, who was the Truman Library director. Theta Sigma Phi was having a national convention, and I had asked Mr. Truman to speak, and so I went back to his office to escort him to the stage and then I introduced him. I don't know what we were talking about, but it looks like we were having a good time.

[chuckling]

SMOOT: So, Steve, have you ever seen any of these pictures before?

HARRISON: No.

GENTRY: My brother was a Marine in China. There he is on the [Great] Wall. Here's Carl Albert.

HARRISON: Okay, I was trying to figure out who that was, too. [chuckling]

SMOOT: Who is Carl Albert?

GENTRY: He was Speaker of the House of Representatives.

HARRISON: That's right.

SMOOT: Oh, that Carl Albert.

GENTRY: Yes, from Oklahoma. Let's see, I guess there's nothing else. These are all just family things. Let me see, I don't think there's anything more in here.

Here's Clifton Daniel's book.

SMOOT: Oh, he's a writer, too?

GENTRY: Yes. I thought that was very good. Then, of course, I've got Margaret's

books, and I've got all the books on Mr. Truman.

HARRISON: Yes, Margaret is supposed to be coming out with a book apparently on her mother.

GENTRY: Yes, she called me, and I sent her some things and helped her with some things. Then Tom Fleming, who is working with her, came and spent an evening with me. That book is good. You know, he was quite a reporter, London, Rome, Paris, everywhere, before he married Margaret. That's name dropping and gossipy, but it's not offensive, you know, it's really good. That's [a picture of] my mother and father over there.

SMOOT: Gosh, how old are these pictures?

GENTRY: Well, you see, my mother and father were married fifteen years before my oldest brother was born, so that was before . . . [tape is turned off] My bank sent me that. I don't know what I did, but anyway . . . I know that if I can just tell you maybe two things, it will connect up with something that you know. Because I know I've done research, and I know how that works.

HARRISON: Yes, we're finding that, and I guess a problem for us is that the Trumans did live a pretty private life, I guess, in their home and . . .

GENTRY: I remember that after Mr. Truman quit going to the office and was at home, why, people would come to see him. Like Jack Benny came and . . . well, some of the comedians . . . right now I can't think. I remember that . . . well, like Bob Hope, you know, a lot of them. And I remember talking to

Mrs. Truman every time somebody would come, and she said, “Well, you know, we lead a quiet life, but it’s not dull.” So I liked that, because they read, and people communicated with them, and people did come to see them.

HARRISON: Were there any other people who visited them regularly that you know of?

GENTRY: Well, locals, some local people visited them, like Rufus Burrus. Have you talked to him?

SMOOT: No, I haven’t spoken to Mr. Burrus.

GENTRY: He went to see her every Saturday, as long as she was able to see anybody. He went to see Mr. Truman, you know, all the time, and then after Mr. Truman was gone, he went to see Mrs. Truman every Saturday until she was no longer able to see someone. Another friend of mine, Mary Bostian, who is a social friend, she would go to see her, take her a box of candy or a pot of homemade soup, you know, and always went in the kitchen.

I know one time my sister-in-law loved to grow flowers, and she had some sweet peas, and they were so pretty, so she picked some, and she was coming to my house. It was my brother’s birthday. She was late getting here, and when she came I said, “Well, where have you been?” It was in the early summer, and the windows were open, and there was a good breeze blowing in here. She said, “Your dining room is almost as cool as Mrs.

Truman's parlor." And I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "Well, I was driving along with this bouquet, and I got there at the Truman house, and I thought, 'I'll just take those in to Mrs. Truman.'" So she said she whirled around and went in the driveway there, and she got in the back. We'd go to May Wallace's. I play bridge with May Wallace, so, you know, I've gone in there, always there, and so Elizabeth said, "Well, I thought some Secret Service man or somebody will come out and say, 'What are you doing? What's your business here?'" And she said nobody came, so she said, "I got out of the car, and I had my sweet peas in my hand, and I walked up on the back porch and I knocked and nobody came. So, finally, a man who was cleaning there came to the door and he said, 'Oh, you've got some flowers for Mrs. Truman? She's just in the parlor, why don't you just take them in there?'" So she said she just walked in. [chuckling] She said, "Boy, they're sure taking good care of her." [laughter] Of course, she knew Mrs. Truman and sat down and had a nice little visit with her. She said Mrs. Truman said, "Well, don't hurry off." She said, "Well, I have to hurry because I'm going to Sue Gentry's to Harvey's birthday luncheon." And she said, "Well, tell her hello and tell her to come and see me." Anyway, I thought that was funny that she could walk in. And Elizabeth said, "How did they know but what I wasn't a little old lady with a bomb in that bouquet?" [laughter] Now, that's just about all I know.

HARRISON: You mentioned earlier about the story about her waiting a couple of minutes, or ten minutes or whatever in the car before, so you'd get there on time, and the idea of social rules. Do you think that was something that Mrs. Truman kind of learned in her political life, or do you think that was something that she learned earlier being a Wallace?

GENTRY: Oh, no, that was something she apparently learned from her mother. You know, that was the social code in her day, that everything was done according to Hoyle, according to . . . who is it? Vanderbilt or . . .

HARRISON: Emily Post.

GENTRY: Emily Post, done according to Emily Post. It was a social error to be late for a luncheon or too early. I tell you, I'd rather somebody be late than too early, because I always am just barely making it. [chuckling] May I get you all some coffee?

SMOOT: I'm fine, thank you.

HARRISON: No, thanks. Well, Pam asked you earlier about Madge Wallace. You mentioned that you talked to her some on the phone. Why would you talk to her on the phone?

GENTRY: Oh, well, I said I called because Colonel Southern would say, "Mrs. Wallace had some guests over the weekend or yesterday from Platte City." He said, "Call and get an item." In those days, we used little trivial things like that. Now you don't do that, you know. I used to go to tea and tell about what

color the candles were and what color the flowers were and all those sort of things. Well, that's a no-no. [chuckling]

HARRISON: What's your recollections of Madge Wallace, or Mother Wallace?

GENTRY: Well, now, I never saw her but once, but she was a very dignified lady; but she was always very pleasant as far as I'm concerned. Of course, the story always goes that she wasn't very thrilled about Mr. Truman, her daughter marrying a farmer. But Mr. Truman always was courteous to her, I know. And those letters, all those letters that he had ever written to Mrs. Truman in that book, Mr. Ferrell's book, he always said, "Give your mother my regards," or "my love," or something like that. He was always very courteous to his mother-in-law, as he was to his own mother.

HARRISON: You're from an old Independence family?

GENTRY: Yes, my folks came . . . Well, really, they've only been here 100 years.
[laughter]

SMOOT: Is that all?

HARRISON: Newcomers. [chuckling]

GENTRY: We newcomers. They only came in . . . I think they came about '84, '85 or '86, or something like that, my mother and father, before they were married. They were married in Kansas City, and they came from Kentucky. But we have some other Gentry relatives who had come sooner. They came to Sedalia, [Missouri], and then came this way. Now, like Mr. Truman's

family, they came here, you know, like before . . . well, in the forties, in the trail days. I think Mrs. Truman's parents only came here after the Civil War.

HARRISON: Do you think that Mrs. Truman was kind of a product of her Independence class, I guess, that, upper middle class?

GENTRY: Yes, they were upper middle class. She was definitely. Her grandmother had come from Vermont, and she was an Englishwoman and a very, very proud woman and very proper. So Mrs. Wallace was brought up a proper young lady, and so Mrs. Truman was brought up a proper young lady, although she was noted for being a tomboy when she was young, but still she never lost her dignity.

I had another thought about the Truman home. I know the rose arbor, it was there when Mr. Truman came home from . . . Well, I know they painted it when they renovated the house, but I don't know what ever happened to it, because it's gone.

HARRISON: It got damaged in a windstorm, I think, and they just tore it down.

SMOOT: In a storm, yes.

GENTRY: Was that it? You see, when he was nominated vice president in Chicago at the 1944 convention, and they came home, and of course there was no fence around the house in those days. They had a reception out in the yard, and he and Mrs. Truman stood out there by the rose arbor, and everybody filed

through. I forgot how many hours it was, everybody came to shake hands with him, you know. Of course, he was young enough and that first time he'd been vice president, you know, a nominee, why, that was quite . . . He was proud of that and he didn't want to fence anybody off. I remember that I was here all during the convention, and then I went to Evanston [Illinois], and he came home, and so I missed all that. But the paper did stories on it, and people told me about it, and so I do know about that. Anyway, I was getting the story . . .

Miss Satter, the neighbors, lived in this house here, and they moved to Chicago, so I was visiting with them. She was one of Mrs. Truman's real good friends, and she had been at the convention with her, and so she told me all these stories about how she and Margaret . . . and she and Margaret would sit down in the box, and Mrs. Truman would sit in the back. So they felt Mrs. Satter . . . Mrs. Satter was a pretty, white-haired woman, prematurely gray, and everybody thought she was Mrs. Truman, and she just had a ball out of that. So, I mean, I got some real good stories out of that.

HARRISON: You mentioned earlier about interviewing Mrs. Truman in the parlor.

What room is that? That would be the large living room?

GENTRY: Yes, that front room there.

HARRISON: Okay, not the one with the piano in it?

GENTRY: No, there's the piano and then the music room and then the library.

HARRISON: Well, I don't have anything else.

SMOOT: I don't have any more questions either. But we are glad that you let us come by and take up some of your valuable time.

GENTRY: Well, I still do my column. I do a column for the *Examiner* called "The Local Gentry," so I was doing that today. I keep thinking I'm going to quit, but that's the only way you can get this trivia in the paper anymore. You know, I mean, I can be kind of casual with my . . . and I can use things they won't use. So I keep thinking I'm going to quit, and then somebody tells me something. I'm just like an old fire horse.

HARRISON: [chuckling] An old reporter.

SMOOT: So do you think that one day you might be able to find that letter I was asking you about earlier?

GENTRY: Oh, yes, I can find that.

HARRISON: If you do, call me at the office.

GENTRY: I don't think I gave it to the Truman Library, because I had some things and they already had some of those. Like when I went to Mr. Truman's press conference when he announced the surrender of Japan, they gave us all a mimeographed copy of his announcement that Japan had surrendered. I thought, a mimeographed copy. Now, just think, you all don't even know what . . .

END OF INTERVIEW